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THESIS

**PRAGMATIC IDEALISM: ERNESTO “CHE”
GUEVARA’S STRATEGIC CHOICE FOR BOLIVIA**

by

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CHOICE FOR BOLIVIA**

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history there are political and military decisions that appear, on the surface, to have been made without a proper assessment of the situation they are meant to address. These decisions are sometimes discounted as wrongheaded or foolish. Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s decision to fight a guerrilla war in Bolivia is one such event. Focus on the failure of Guevara’s Bolivian mission and his subsequent death at the hands of the Bolivian military have allowed scholars to ignore the geopolitical and social context that framed Guevara’s decision-making process. Dismissing the Bolivian mission as flawed based on its outcome creates a false sense that the circumstances surrounding Guevara’s decision to fight are unimportant. Considering that ideas do not die, it can be argued that understanding why Guevara fought is more important than whether he was victorious or not. This thesis utilizes Guevara’s writings and secondary sources to present the argument that his actions were not rooted in blind ideology and mindless rage, as some scholars suggest, but in a pragmatic blend of ideological, strategic, and psychological factors meant to achieve a specific end.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
A.	OVERVIEW.....	1
B.	LITERATURE REVIEW	3
II.	IDEOLOGY: PRAGMATISM, ARMED STRUGGLE, AND A NEW REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD	11
A.	A PRAGMATIC REVOLUTIONARY.....	11
B.	A PERSONAL WAR WITH THE “ENEMY TO THE NORTH”	12
C.	THE NECESSITY OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE	16
1.	Seizure of Power.....	17
2.	Liquidation of the Armed Forces	18
D.	THE GUERRILLA <i>FOCO</i> AS REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD	19
E.	THE FORGING OF THE “NEW MAN” AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO SOCIAL CHANGE	23
F.	CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	24
III.	STRATEGY: GEOGRAPHY, POLITICS, AND POPULAR SUPPORT	27
A.	INTRODUCTION.....	27
B.	GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS.....	28
C.	THE BARRIENTOS REGIME	31
D.	A WEAK MILITARY	36
E.	THE LOSS OF OTHER REVOLUTIONARY OPPORTUNITIES	38
F.	CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	39
IV.	PSYCHOLOGY: FAILURE, LOYALTY, AND IDENTITY	41
A.	INTRODUCTION.....	41
B.	PRESSURE OF FAILURE	42
C.	PRESSURE OF LOYALTY	44
D.	PRESSURE OF IDENTITY	47
E.	CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	50
V.	CONCLUSION	51
	LIST OF REFERENCES	57
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	61

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BCP	Bolivian Communist Party
PGT	Guatemalan Party of Labor
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. OVERVIEW

The Bolivian guerilla movement of 1966–1967 is considered the “most notable failure” of all guerrilla insurgencies in Latin America.¹ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, along with 17 Cubans, 29 Bolivians, three Peruvians, and an East German, attempted to draw the United States into a second front of what he viewed as an international war against the global capitalist system.² For seven months, Guevara’s *foco* (focus) evaded Bolivian forces, won a number of indecisive victories, and gained increased support from the Bolivian tin miners.³ In October 1967, half of Guevara’s people were cut down in an ambush while crossing a river after failing to reunite with Guevara and his main column. Surrounded by hostile forces and cut off from outside communication due to damaged radio equipment, Guevara was captured outside of the village of La Higuera on October 7, 1967. He was executed by the Bolivian army the next day. His capture and execution were a blow both to the Cuban Revolution, whose struggle to forge a path free from U.S. and Soviet influence was dependent on its ability to secure allies elsewhere, and the international vision of revolution, advanced by its leader and a close friend of Guevara’s, Fidel Castro. Guevara’s decision to use Bolivia as the staging ground for a continental guerrilla movement has been referred to as “unwise,” “adventurist,” and even “infantile romanticism.”⁴ In contrast, this thesis argues that Guevara’s decision to go to Bolivia was driven by a combination of strategic necessity, ideological desire, and psychological pressure leveraged through his chosen profession as a revolutionary and his close ties to Fidel Castro.

1 Timothy P. Wickham Crowley, *Exploring Revolution: Essays on Latin American Insurgency and Revolutionary Theory* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), 47.

2 Ernesto Che Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” in *Guerrilla Warfare*, ed. Brian Loveman and Thomas R. Davies (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 176.

3 Rodolfo Saldaña, *Fertile Ground: Che Guevara and Bolivia* (New York: Pathfinder, 1997), 31–32.

4 Fidel Castro, “A Necessary Introduction,” quoted in Ernesto Che Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 14; J. Bowyer Bell, *The Myth of the Guerrilla: Revolutionary Theory and Malpractice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 210.

An outline of the ideological drivers, strategic factors, and psychological pressures that impacted Guevara's decision to enter the Bolivian jungle conveys the complexity of his decision-making process. Focusing on Guevara's perspective, as presented through his own journals and the words of those who knew him, provides insight into his rationalizations and thought processes. This thesis supplements the primary sources with secondary analysis, which allows Guevara to refute his critics with his own words.

The discussion of ideological reasons in this thesis introduces Guevara's beliefs regarding the necessity of the armed struggle and the role of the guerrilla in that struggle. In contrast with the views of his peers, Guevara believed that the political solutions they sought would prove to be incomplete if they were not grounded in armed struggle.⁵ Guevara's ideas, despite their ideological appearance, were grounded in a pragmatic interpretation of Marxism based on his personal experiences and observations in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Cuba.⁶

The strategic explanations for Guevara's decision lie in his primary goal of threatening the United States into deploying armed force to protect U.S. interest in Latin America in the hope that the war would drain its resources sufficiently for revolutionary forces to upset the existing world order.⁷ In this thesis, an examination of the geopolitical conditions in Bolivia reveals their suitability for enabling Guevara to start a prolonged struggle meant to accelerate the collapse of the U.S.-led capitalist system. This analysis is augmented by a look into the broader revolutionary context within which Guevara was operating and examines what resources were available to him. A follow-on review of revolutionary events ties Guevara's available resources to their role in influencing his decision to go to Bolivia.

5 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 40.

6 Paulo Drinot, *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 16, 29; Paul J. Dosal, *Comandante Che: Guerrilla Soldier, Commander, and Strategist, 1956–1967* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 187; Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, Revolutionary War* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1973), 3.

7 Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," 176.

The third chapter addresses multiple psychological pressures on Guevara and their role in his final decision. Analysis of these psychological pressures on Guevara to go to Bolivia reveal how the loss of friends in previous failed guerrilla attempts and his relationship with Fidel created incentives for Guevara to see his ideas through from the first stage of the Bolivian *foco*'s development to its culminating point outside of La Higuera. The pressure that these events created on Guevara to take action is presented as a driving factor in his decision to enter Bolivia before his security could be achieved through a more mature guerrilla movement.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of previous analysis and criticism regarding Guevara's decision sets the stage for the presentation of the argument that Guevara pushed into Bolivia by strategic, ideological, and psychological factors that resulted from his early travels, experiences in Cuba, the loss of his friends, his friendship with Castro, and his revolutionary conviction. There is an abundance of explanations for Guevara's decision to start his Bolivian *foco*. As revealed earlier, these explanations can be separated along ideological, strategic, or psychological lines. While there have been many biographies and hagiographies written about Guevara, there is not a lot of specific focus on the factors that drove him to Bolivia. In large part, this is caused by the absence of a direct explanation in Guevara's personal writings from the time he left Africa in 1965 to the time he entered Bolivia in 1966. The lack of a personal explanation from Guevara himself has led to speculation and finger pointing in attempt to answer both why Guevara went and who chose Bolivia as the location for his final *foco*. The focus of this thesis is the analysis of Guevara's potential motivations for being so closely involved in the Bolivian *foco* in its embryonic stages, after previously being content to wait for a movement worthy "to incorporate a revolutionary of his political and military stature" to emerge.⁸ Primary and secondary sources are used to present both possible explanations and existing criticisms. The literature review follows the same pattern of the rest of the thesis. It is broken into three

⁸ Manuel Piñeiro, *Che Guevara and the Latin American Revolutionary Movements* (New York: Ocean Press, 2001), 19.

sections with explanations grouped under the umbrellas of ideology, strategy, and psychology.

Ideologically, Guevara was a true believer in the worldwide proletarian revolution.⁹ He saw in imperialism the encroaching arms of capitalism. In addition, he believed in an inevitable war between communism and capitalism and was convinced that he was an instrument of the inevitable victory of communism.¹⁰ Many have used his internationalist ideology to emphasize that Bolivia was never his goal at all, but just the means to the more extensive end of continent wide revolution.¹¹ In support of these claims, many of those close to him have identified Peru and Argentina as targets for future *foci*.¹² Guevara envisioned a continental guerrilla war meant to free Latin America from “Yankee imperialism.”¹³ Some say the Russians considered these ideas to be “infantile romanticism,” and Guevara referred to himself as a Quixotic-type figure on multiple occasions.¹⁴ Accusations and personal degradations such as these fail to adequately consider the more pragmatic influences on his decision making.

The second chapter of this thesis outlines the role Guevara’s ideology played in his decision to personally lead a guerrilla *foco* in Bolivia. His ideology formed the framework upon which he built a strategy meant to draw the United States into a second front in what he viewed as an international war against imperialism.¹⁵ The specifics of that strategy are covered in the third chapter. Before addressing the rationality of his strategic reasons for choosing Bolivia as the site of his guerrilla *foco*, it is beneficial to examine why he believed in the absolute necessity of any guerrilla movement.

9 Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 174.

10 Ibid.

11 Régis Debray, *Che’s Guerrilla War* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1975), 72.

12 Ibid, 106; Richard L. Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary: Che Guevara’s Last Mission* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 87.

13 Che Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies of the Latin American Revolution,” in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, ed. Rolando Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdéz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 83, 86.

14 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 210.

15 Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 176.

Guevara's ideological belief in the necessity of armed struggle as a vehicle for social change fueled his conviction that an attempt to create a second theatre in what he saw as the global war against imperialism had become a moral necessity.¹⁶ His desire to create "two, three, or many Vietnams" is well documented in his own writings and speeches.¹⁷ Chapter III provides a discussion regarding Bolivia's strategic significance as a central location whereat all Latin American guerrillas would be welcome to come and train, as cited by those who knew Guevara well.¹⁸ The influence held by Cuban relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) over the decision is also discussed. As Guevara's attempts to ignite armed revolution from a distance continued to sputter out across Latin America, Soviet Communists were beginning to support political inclusion instead of armed insurrection as their primary power seizing strategy.¹⁹ As the support for armed insurrection began to wane, it benefitted Fidel Castro, Guevara's primary supporter, to at least appear to distance himself and his regime from Guevara.²⁰ Some sources use this explanation to place the decision for Guevara's move to Bolivia on Castro, but Guevara's letter resigning his Cuban citizenship and his secret entrances into Cuba following the Congo expedition seem to indicate that Guevara appreciated the strategic benefits of such an arrangement.²¹ As more information has become available over the years, the closeness of the Guevara-Castro relationship, especially during the period following the Congo mission, has been illuminated.

Following the abrupt end of the Congolese insurgency, Guevara seemed a man without a country or immediate cause. Some argue that he refused to return to Cuba given the publication of a farewell letter he wrote to Fidel renouncing his ties to Cuba.²²

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Fidel Castro, *Che: A Memoir* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 166.

19 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 88, 210.

20 Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 594.

21 Ibid., 597–598, 646–647.

22 Che Guevara, "Farewell Letter to Castro," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 422–423.

Some accounts suggest he planned to go straight to Argentina.²³ As it was, he split his time prior to Bolivia between Tanzania and Czechoslovakia.²⁴

Whether Guevara spent the majority of his time nursing the emotional wounds of his defeat in the Congo or planning his next move is a debate that is still not completely resolved. Fidel and Manuel Piñeiro, Guevara's partner in Cuba's revolutionary training program, both claim that Guevara made all of the decisions regarding Bolivia.²⁵ Two of Guevara's better-known biographers, Jorge Castañeda and Jon Lee Anderson, suggest that Castro played the lead role in convincing Guevara to lead the Bolivian *foco*.²⁶ Without documentation from Guevara or an admission from Castro, it is impossible to resolve the issue completely.

While Guevara was biding his time, an upsurge in unrest in South America, specifically in Bolivia among the tin miners, drew the attention of the Cuban government.²⁷ This unrest, coupled with the perceived incompetence of the Bolivian army and Bolivia's long history of revolution, made it an inviting target for the insertion of Cuban revolutionary cadres.²⁸ Internationally, the United States was being drawn into a quagmire in Vietnam and cut off its military aid for multiple Latin American countries.²⁹ With a highly integrated clandestine network already in place, and the supposed support of the Bolivian Communist party, Bolivia in 1965 looked like a reasonable spot to start a continent-wide revolution.³⁰

23 Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 327.

24 Ibid., 327–328.

25 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 88.

26 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 327–328; Anderson, *Che*, 648.

27 Saldaña, *Fertile Ground*, 43–46.

28 Marvin D. Resnick, *The Black Beret: The Life and Meaning of Che Guevara* (New York: Ballantine, 1969), 206–07.

29 Ibid., 89.

30 Anderson, *Che*, 650–659.

With his plans already in motion, Guevara has been accused of failing to respond properly to two changes in the revolutionary environment. In 1966, Bolivia officially elected President René Barrientos, the current dictator, conferring legitimacy to his rule.³¹ Many critics use this election to accuse Guevara of violating his dictate against starting a guerrilla movement against a popularly elected government.³² Generally emphasized in these critiques is the idea that Barrientos's election could be viewed as illegitimate. The second key change dealt with the plans for the insurrection itself. In his original intentions, Guevara planned to start his *foco* in the northwest of Bolivia, close to the Peruvian border.³³ Due to the population density, his Bolivian network recommended using a farm to the southwest, closer to the Argentinian border.³⁴ The shift would remove the guerrillas from their supporters in the tin miners' union and take them out of the Quechan speaking regions within which they had originally intended to operate.³⁵ Not much is discussed in the sources about why Guevara approved this shift, but it can be rationalized based on the relative risk each region presented to the *foco* in its early stages of development. The Ñancahuazú River Valley, despite its distance from the tin mining regions, presented a lightly populated, densely wooded area in which a budding guerrilla movement could grow in relative safety.

Psychologically, Guevara's decision has been viewed as resulting from his failures. As head of Cuba's guerrilla training program, he was responsible for teaching his theories to would be revolutionaries from all over the world.³⁶ By 1966, criticism that Guevara's theories were worthless and that the revolutionary image he had cultivated had little substance are believed to have taken their toll.³⁷ This has led some to believe that the Bolivian *foco* was meant to illustrate to Guevara's doubters that he could make his

31 Ricardo Rojo, *My Friend Ché* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 189–190.

32 Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 51.

33 Anderson, *Che*, 660.

34 Ibid.

35 Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 102.

36 Resnick, *Black Beret*, 196.

37 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 210–211.

theories work.³⁸ Building the guerrilla movement from the ground up would allow him to have the spotlight to himself, and its success would make up for the many failures that bore his mark.³⁹ Others emphasize the toll the loss of his friends took on his psyche as the primary contributing factor to his decision. Piñeiro specifically recalls that the failure of the Cuban-backed Argentine *foco* had worsened Guevara's impatience to get back into the field.⁴⁰ He is also alleged to have complained to a friend about being, "trapped behind a desk," while those executing his orders died.⁴¹ Either because of his pride or the struggle of watching people die, Guevara finally took action, leaving Cuba to fight, first in the Congo, and then in Bolivia.

After repeatedly watching other movements fail, especially the one in the Congo, Guevara concluded the failures of revolutionary movements were the product of their leaders, who, in Guevara's estimation, lacked the appropriate revolutionary credentials.⁴² It appears he had come to believe that if he wanted something done right, he would have to do it himself. Despite being older than his estimate of the proper age for a guerrilla, the pride of action and intense calling he felt as a revolutionary compelled him to undertake his Bolivian incursion.⁴³

Most of the existing literature is focused more on who is to blame rather than in analyzing the underlying causes for Guevara's decision in depth. Somewhere in the myth that has become the *Guerrillero Heroico*, we have forgotten that Guevara was a human being no more perfect than anyone else and driven to action through a mixture of internal and external motivators. Though they may seem irrational and adventurist on the surface, these motivations can be presented as pragmatically developed convictions based on personal experience. Allowing Guevara to answer his critics in his own voice emphasizes that strategic, ideological, and psychological factors combined to provide a

38 Ibid.

39 Resnick, *Black Beret*, 229.

40 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 19.

41 Anderson, *Che*, 561.

42 Ernesto Che Guevara, *Congo Diary: Episodes of the Revolutionary War in the Congo* (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 2011), 220.

43 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 238.

rationalization for Guevara's decision to fight in Bolivia. Dismissing his rationale out of hand can produce a lack of appreciation for the complicated relationship that ideas, beliefs, and geographical or historical context can have on an individual's decision-making process.

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II. IDEOLOGY: PRAGMATISM, ARMED STRUGGLE, AND A NEW REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD

A. A PRAGMATIC REVOLUTIONARY

In an interview with Laura Bergquist in 1960, Guevara describes himself as a “pragmatic revolutionary.”⁴⁴ In the interview, he discussed the need to utilize experience as a tool, and emphasized that practical learning is the best method for avoiding the development of inaccurate theories.⁴⁵ Guevara’s desire to develop theory through practical experience is believed to reflect his medical training, and his search for practical solutions was also evident during his travels through Latin America as a young man.⁴⁶ Applying his personal experiences to Leninist thought was Guevara’s first step in developing what he considered a pragmatic Marxism, established through the “University of Experience.”⁴⁷ Each step that Guevara took prior to his arrival in Bolivia played a role in shaping his pragmatic ideology, providing data points and observations that convinced him of the truth of his theories. Despite his acknowledgement that he had set “reason aside and acquired something like faith,” shortly after joining with Fidel, he insisted that his beliefs were based “very severely in the facts.”⁴⁸ The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the major tenets of Guevara’s ideology, as developed through his analysis of contemporary events, while illustrating their impact on his decision to enter Bolivia in 1966.

First, the deepening of Guevara’s stout anti-Yankeeism is examined. Focusing on his personal writings regarding Guatemala, it is possible to argue that his experiences

44 Che Guevara, “Interview with Laura Bergquist #1,” in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 386.

45 Ibid.

46 Alma Guillermoprieto, *Looking for History: Dispatches from Latin America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 76–77, 79.

47 Che Guevara, “Interview with Laura Bergquist #2,” in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 398.

48 Ernesto Che Guevara, *Latin American Diaries: The Sequel to the Motorcycle Diaries* (New York: Ocean Press, 2011), 149; Che Guevara, “Interview with Maurice Zeitlin,” in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 395.

there hardened a mainstream dislike of U.S. actions in Latin America into a pointed assessment of the United States as the vanguard of imperialism. The second tenet, his belief in the need for international armed struggle, provides insight into his views on the regime of Bolivian President René Barrientos and his skepticism surrounding its revolutionary credentials. It also contributes to the vision of the Bolivian *foco*, not as an isolated guerrilla movement, but as an attempt to create a massive battlespace meant to draw in and drain the forces of international capitalism, not conquer territory.⁴⁹ Third, an analysis of the assertion that the *foco* could act as a revolutionary vanguard reveals why, despite arguments to the contrary, Guevara's reasoning was practical, and not romantic, in nature. Once the practicality of Guevara's ideology has been established, it is possible to proceed to an assessment of his strategic reasons for choosing Bolivia as the location for his *foco*.

B. A PERSONAL WAR WITH THE “ENEMY TO THE NORTH”

The primary building block of Guevara's ideology was his anti-Yankeeism. Over time, it is possible to see Guevara's casual criticisms of the United States evolve into a deep hatred. This hatred fueled his desire to develop a guerrilla front on the South American continent.⁵⁰ Starting a guerrilla war in Bolivia, a country that had received aid from the U.S. throughout the 1950s and 1960s, could have been his way of drawing its northern ally into a prolonged struggle.⁵¹ His stated goal was not the overthrow of the regime of President René Barrientos; it was to draw the U.S. into a second Vietnam.⁵² Without his burning anti-U.S. sentiment, it is possible that Guevara would have never set foot in Bolivia. This section outlines the experiences that radicalized Guevara's opinion of the United States, key to Guevara's desire to conduct an international war against U.S.-led imperialism.

49 Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 175.

50 Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 86.

51 John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 266–267.

52 Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 176.

Guevara's mistrust of the United States was not a unique trait. It was a sentiment reflected in the words of the people with whom he interacted on his travels throughout Latin America as a young man. Both his time in Chile and in Costa Rica produced such interactions. In the former case, a mine employee shared his contempt for his "Yankee bosses" for "losing thousands of pesos every day in a strike so as not to give a poor worker a few more centavos."⁵³ Another example of shared mistrust of the United States between Guevara and the subjects of his observation is represented in a conversation he had with Manuel Mora Valverde. Mora, a leader in the Communist Party in Costa Rica, voiced his concern over how the president of Costa Rica, Pepe Figueres, would respond when he "sees the light and stops having any illusion about the goodness of the United States."⁵⁴ Guevara found his anti-American sentiments echoed continuously through his journeys, further binding such leanings to his fundamental ideology. Through his own words, in both journals and letters, the development of his personal stance on the matter can be traced.

As noted in his writings, Guevara's disapproval of the United States evolved from one of distaste to hatred, which ultimately pushed him into direct action against the superpower. One of Guevara's first statements regarding the United States comes from his travels in Chile, where he observes that "the biggest effort Chile should make is to shake its uncomfortable Yankee friend from its back."⁵⁵ He saw this as a difficult task complicated by the pervasiveness of U.S. dollars and its decade's long pattern of defending its economic interest in Latin America.⁵⁶ He later refers to the "Yankee domination in Peru" in a letter to a childhood friend, Tita.⁵⁷ Despite his observation of U.S. dominance in Latin America, it is not until choosing to join Fidel on his journey back to Cuba that Guevara talks explicitly about "the enemy that lies to the north."⁵⁸ Even

⁵³ Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* (New York: Ocean Press, 2001), 79.

⁵⁴ Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 55.

⁵⁵ Guevara, *Motorcycle Diaries*, 89.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 149.

later, as he was leaving for Bolivia, Guevara penned a letter calling for united action against the “enemy of all mankind.”⁵⁹ The transformation of the United States from “uncomfortable friend” to “enemy of all mankind” was a practical result of his experiences in Guatemala during the fall of the government led by Jacobo Arbenz, and it reflects a much deeper and motivating disapproval of the United States than is found in his early writings.⁶⁰

When Guevara first entered Guatemala in 1953, he did so as a “100% adventurer” with plans to move on to visit Mexico and Europe.⁶¹ By the time he left for Mexico, he claimed to be “ready to go next time something breaks out” between the United States and anywhere he happened to be.⁶² According to a letter to his mother, despite his anti-American sentiments, Guevara, a medical student in his native Argentina, was pursuing an opportunity to work as a doctor for the United Fruit Company, an organization that fully embodied U.S. interventionism in Latin America.⁶³ Guevara’s willingness to work for an organization so obviously allied with the United States suggests that, regardless of his strong feelings, he did not see the United States as an enemy in dire need of eradication. He does not mention why he would consider working for United Fruit, but his willingness to do so suggests that Guevara’s need for employment was greater than his need to live according to a particular ideal. Moreover, it certainly does not appear to be an acceptable course of action for someone who claims, “we must carry the war into every corner the enemy happens to carry it...we must attack him wherever he may be.”⁶⁴ Failing to land the job at United Fruit, Guevara volunteered his services as a doctor for Arbenz’s forces as soon as the army under Castillo Armas crossed the border into Guatemala.⁶⁵

59 Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 176.

60 Kenneth Minogue, “Che Guevara,” in *The New Left*, ed. by Maurice Cranston (New York: The New Library Press, 1971), 25.

61 Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 149.

62 Ibid., 138.

63 Ibid., 81.

64 Guevara, “Message to the Tri-Continental,” 174.

65 Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 87–92.

For reasons he does not mention, his services are not utilized.⁶⁶ Instead, he spent most of the invasion attempting to convince Arbenz, through letters, to arm the populace and use them to fight.⁶⁷ He blamed Arbenz's failure to arm the populace for Guatemala's defeat, a conclusion that would directly impact his belief in the necessity for armed struggle.⁶⁸ He also describes a "magical sensation of invulnerability" during bombardments and in the presence of gunfire that added to the "climate of struggle" produced by the conflict.⁶⁹ Detained after the fall of the Arbenz regime, Guevara made his way north to Mexico following his release.⁷⁰ Though he did not know it at the time, these were the experiences that would encourage him to join the Cuban Revolution, wherein he earned a reputation for accepting the most dangerous duties, likely in an attempt to recreate the sensations he experienced in Guatemala.⁷¹ They are also the capstone events in the U.S. treatment of Latin American that caused him to feel "increasingly indignant," resulting in a study of the United States that produced "a scientific explanation" for its actions, namely, imperialism.⁷²

Utilized in the writings of V. I. Lenin to explain the continuation of capitalism despite predictions of its demise, the term imperialism was likely introduced to Guevara following his move to Mexico following his time in Guatemala.⁷³ U.S. influence in the overthrow of Arbenz allowed Guevara to tap into a long-developing aspect of Latin American culture, the mistrust of the United States.⁷⁴ U.S. history in Latin America, especially in Central America, is filled with military interventionism in support of economic elites.⁷⁵ From the Mexican War, through the Spanish-American War, and

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 90–92.

69 Ibid., 89.

70 Rojo, *My Friend Ché*, 63.

71 Anderson, *Che*, 159.

72 Ibid., 149.

73 Minogue, "Che Guevara," 40.

74 Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 51.

75 Ibid., 10–12.

multiple interventions in Nicaragua, for example, the United States had consistently sought to exercise its hegemony in the region.⁷⁶ The United States was also increasingly adopting a policy of support for repressive dictators who eschewed any modicum of socialism.⁷⁷ This policy contributed directly to the popular view of the United States as the protagonist of Latin American social injustice.⁷⁸ Drawing on these observations, his travels, and their corresponding interactions, Guevara concluded that the United States was the vanguard of Lenin's imperialism.⁷⁹ This sentiment is well captured when he stated, "Yankee imperialism...has to be attacked in its bases of support in the colonies and neocolonies that are the foundation of its system of world domination."⁸⁰ His decision to join Fidel and the Cuban Revolution, and therefore fight in Bolivia, was a direct result of his ideological conviction, based on personal experience, to take action to free Latin America and the world from the imperialism of the United States.⁸¹

C. THE NECESSITY OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE

Beyond allowing Guevara to identify the United States as his as well as the world's primary enemy, his Guatemalan experiences also laid the foundation for his commitment to armed revolutionary struggle.⁸² This section recounts specific episodes that reinforced Guevara's belief that an armed struggle against the imperialistic capitalist system was necessary for a complete revolution. Beginning with his assertion that the goal of a revolution is to seize power, the section concludes with Guevara's reasoning as conveyed through his message to the Second Tri-continental Convention in 1967. It is possible to see Guevara's generalized ideas about revolution crystalize through his study and practice of Marxism. Furthermore, the strengthening of Guevara's convictions

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁹ Minogue, "Che Guevara," 40.

⁸⁰ Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 17.

⁸¹ Che Guevara, "Interview by Telemundo Television," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 377.

⁸² Che Guevara, "Interview with Jorge Masetti," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 364.

regarding the necessity and rationality of armed struggle against the United States resulted directly from the practical exercise of his beliefs. The impact of these beliefs on his strategic decision to fight in Bolivia is examined in Chapter III. The psychological pressures that resulted from his pursuit of the armed struggle in accordance with those beliefs is addressed in Chapter IV.

1. Seizure of Power

For Guevara, the goal of guerrilla warfare was to inspire a broad popular movement to rise against the capitalist establishment and seize power.⁸³ In 1961, he wrote that power is an “indispensable instrument for applying and developing the revolutionary program.”⁸⁴ Without the seizure of power, there was no real revolution.⁸⁵ Even in places where revolutionary forces had seized power, like Bolivia in 1952 and Guatemala in 1954, their gains were limited by either the continuation of existing institutions or the failure of the people to arm themselves. His point is illustrated by two events in particular. In Bolivia, Guevara noted that the revolution was “bound to fail if it does not manage to break down the spiritual isolation of the Indians...giving them back their stature as human beings.”⁸⁶ In 1965, it seemed to many observers that the tin miners were still awaiting that restoration. The fall of Guatemalan President Arbenz’s popularly elected government helped convince Guevara that a victory through the ballot box was unsustainable as Latin America had become a “parade ground for imperialism,” and it was not strong enough to resist the forces of capitalism.⁸⁷ In both cases, Guevara viewed the revolutions as failures due to a lack of the development of a revolutionary program caused by an incomplete seizure of power.⁸⁸ In Bolivia, that failure was represented by the government’s continued poor treatment of its indigenous population; in Guatemala, it

83 Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 77; Guevara, “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method,” 148.

84 Che Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case or Vanguard in the Struggle against Colonialism,” in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 66.

85 Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 77.

86 Rojo, *My Friend Ché*, 28.

87 Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 79.

88 Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case,” 41.

was exposed by the ability of U.S. backed forces to seize power from President Arbenz. Convinced of the necessity of a complete revolution, Guevara remarked that, in general, “all the institutions that sheltered the former regime should be wiped out.”⁸⁹ In Latin America’s case, Guevara added that it was “one large field of imperialist struggle,” and “unpardonable to look only to elections.”⁹⁰ There was only one road to meaningful power in the Americas to Guevara, and it was through force of arms.⁹¹

2. Liquidation of the Armed Forces

Guevara also believed that armed struggle was demanded by any revolutionary movement in the Americas because of the closeness of the army to the state. Guevara notes that the “liquidation of the army is a fundamental principle of democracy.”⁹² In the Americas, at least in most cases, the existing armed forces functioned as the internal protectors of the state.⁹³ Guevara was sure they would not be willing to “accept liquidation” and relinquish their power and status.⁹⁴ Guevara allows that some professional soldiers would come over to the side of the revolution, but he maintained that most would refuse due to their contempt for the revolutionaries.⁹⁵ It was only by removing the military’s significance as a political actor by its destruction that revolutionary forces could seize power and complete the revolution.⁹⁶ For Guevara, this theoretical assessment of the need for an armed struggle received its authentication in Cuba, where the people’s revolutionary army defeated and then dismantled President Fulgencio Batista’s army.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 131.

⁹⁰ Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case,” 61, 66.

⁹¹ Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 80.

⁹² Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 91.

⁹³ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 289.

⁹⁴ Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case,” 66.

⁹⁵ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 131–132.

⁹⁶ Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 91.

⁹⁷ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 50.

D. THE GUERRILLA *FOCO* AS REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD

Guevara's most significant contribution to revolutionary theory was, and still is, a subject of debate. From his experience as a member and leader of Fidel's guerrilla army, Guevara reached a number of conclusions regarding guerrilla warfare, the most important being that the guerrilla band, or *foco* could operate as the traditional revolutionary vanguard of the Marxian proletariat.⁹⁸ His argument ran counter to the insistence of most theorists who advocated that a Soviet-backed Communist Party needed to serve as the revolutionary vanguard.⁹⁹ This section outlines the origins and reasoning for Guevara's conclusions, offers a rebuttal to those who see his theory as the product of a romanticized version of the Cuban experience, and highlights the impact it had on his decision to go to Bolivia.

As stated before, Guevara considered himself a "pragmatic revolutionary" who used the analysis of his personal experiences to adapt Marxism to a Latin American context.¹⁰⁰ His travels throughout Latin America as a young man led him to write that he had "Latin America sized up."¹⁰¹ Guevara's confidence in his claim led him to produce multiple writings regarding revolution in Latin America. Guevara specifically set out to take to task those who exhibited "the defeatist attitude of revolutionaries or pseudo-revolutionaries who remain inactive...who sit down to wait until in some mechanical way all necessary objective and subjective conditions are given without accelerating them."¹⁰² To Guevara, the Cuban Revolution had shown that it was possible for a guerrilla *foco* to accelerate the revolutionary process.¹⁰³ The growth of the revolution from 12 men in the mountains into a broad-based coalition convinced him that guerrillas could inspire the "consciousness of the possibility of victory through violent struggle," or the subjective

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Minogue, "Che Guevara," 24; Eric Voegelin, "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *The Review of Politics* 12, no. 3 (July 1950): 299.

¹⁰⁰ Guevara, "Interview with Laura Bergquist #1," 386.

¹⁰¹ Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 149.

¹⁰² Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 50.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

conditions necessary for a revolution.¹⁰⁴ It also gave rise to his belief that the leadership of the revolution belonged to those “at the forefront of the working class through the struggle for achieving power.”¹⁰⁵ Guevara may have believed that revolution could only be either “socialist...or fake,” but he did not believe that any particular party possessed a natural right to the mantle of leadership.¹⁰⁶ This stance placed him at odds with the communist parties on the continent, and it influenced his handling of Bolivian Communist Party leader Mario Monje’s demand to lead Guevara’s *foco*, an episode covered later in the thesis.¹⁰⁷ It also led many of his opponents to label him an “adventurist” and encouraged the opinion that he had a “machine gun” in his head and was incapable of envisioning a revolution through political struggle. In turn, Guevara considered them to be cowards, who were unwilling to sacrifice their own comfort for the people they claimed to be leading. To him, these naysayers lacked both the practical experience and revolutionary commitment to understand the “scientific truth” that bringing about more “socially just systems” needed to be thought of “fundamentally in terms of the armed struggle.”¹⁰⁸

The adoption of the idea of the *foco* as revolutionary vanguard, as experienced in the Cuban case, meant that the subjective conditions for revolution no longer had to be met before the revolution could begin.¹⁰⁹ Guevara’s assessment of the factors contributing to Fidel’s victory in Cuba, when combined with his observations from his earlier travels, convinced him that the guerrilla *foco* could be used as an inspiration to the masses, and that, by its very existence, people would be encouraged to support and join revolutionary movements across the Americas.¹¹⁰ Thus, his trek into Bolivia was not as irrational or as passion led as critics might argue. He believed it rational to pursue revolution prior to the maturation of a revolutionary movement as long as the objective

104 Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case,” 63.

105 Guevara, “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method,” 151.

106 Ibid.

107 Anderson, *Che*, 672.

108 Guevara, “Tactics and Strategies,” 80.

109 Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 50.

110 Ibid.

conditions were met.¹¹¹ In Bolivia, as is presented in the next chapter, the tin miners were, in some observer's opinions, providing those conditions.¹¹²

Guevara did not expect everyone to join the *foco* directly, though he did believe, as was traditional, that the guerrilla army would survive to form a conventional army that would eventually win a conventional war.¹¹³ He also envisioned the development of urban movements and safe havens that would help sustain the *foco*.¹¹⁴ In a dispatch entitled, "To the Miners of Bolivia," Guevara encourages each of them to "struggle within the limits of his power."¹¹⁵ It can be argued that Guevara did not believe in the superiority of the *foco* as much as he did the limitations of urban movements. He considered the movements particularly limited when they were not coordinated with the actions of the *foco*, a lesson he also gleaned from his Cuban experiences.¹¹⁶

On three separate occasions, urban forces attempted to rise up against Batista in support of Fidel's guerrillas and were crushed. Guevara barely mentions any of them, except as a second-hand account of events he considered, "generally fruitless and culminating in unfortunate results."¹¹⁷ His flippant attitude toward these events has led some critics to suggest that Guevara had misread the Cuban Revolution. For instance, Paul J. Dosal, in *Commandante Che*, points to the higher number of urban casualties suffered throughout the campaign as an example of the importance of the events.¹¹⁸ Dosal emphasizes that Che "ignores, neglects, or discredits" anyone who did not head to the mountains to participate in the guerrilla struggle.¹¹⁹ While Guevara may have

111 Ibid., 51.

112 Rodolfo Saldaña, *Fertile Ground*, 18.

113 Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 54.

114 Ernesto Che Guevara, "Instructions to Urban Cadres," in *The Bolivian Diary* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 258.

115 Che Guevara, "To the Miners of Bolivia," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 186.

116 Ernesto Guevara, *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War 1956–1958* (New York: Pathfinder, 1996), 265.

117 Ibid.

118 Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 175–178.

119 Ibid.

downplayed the impact of urban events in Cuba, his more generalized writings on guerrilla warfare emphasize that urban activity is a necessary, if subservient, part of the guerrilla struggle.¹²⁰ Guevara provides additional reasons for favoring the countryside as the primary theatre of operations as well. He begins by referring to the guerrilla war as being “less grievous for the sons of the people,” and then he stresses that the guerrilla movement is superior because it reduces the vulnerability of the revolutionary movement and protects innocent life.¹²¹ He also stresses that “it is absolutely just to avoid all useless sacrifices.”¹²² Guevara is not necessarily focused on the guerrilla struggle simply to puff up the guerrilla, he also senses the strategic need to both protect the revolutionary leadership and minimize non-combatant casualties. The protection of the revolutionary leadership is a theme that he returns to on multiple occasions.¹²³

Regarding the “General Strike,” in *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara states that the required conditions “rarely come about spontaneously” and that “it is necessary to create” them by “explaining the purposes of the revolution and by demonstrating the forces of the people and their possibilities.”¹²⁴ In other words, the general strike can only be effective if the guerrilla *foco* creates the conditions by educating the workers and giving them an example to follow.

In Guevara’s opinion, the guerrillas rescued the revolution from the failed efforts of the urban cadres by holding out in the mountains until Batista’s regime was weak enough to be overthrown.¹²⁵ For others, the revolution was saved by the urban movements buying time for the guerrillas through their sacrifice.¹²⁶ While his conclusions have drawn criticism for misrepresenting urban movements, he is right to emphasize both that the *foco* helped inspire the urban movements and protected Cuba’s

¹²⁰ Guevara, “Cuba: Exceptional Case,” 68.

¹²¹ Guevara, *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, 267.

¹²² Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” 173.

¹²³ Guevara, “Cuba Exceptional Case,” 67.

¹²⁴ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 57.

¹²⁵ Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 180.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

future leaders from the risks related to urban action. The guerrillas in Cuba both spurred the people into action and acted as a bodyguard for the leadership element of the movement. Guevara clearly favored the guerrilla struggle in the countryside over urban revolutionary activity, and his reasons for doing so, whether due to a misreading of the Cuban revolution or not, produced a rational decision to emphasize a mode of struggle that he saw as less risky to “the people” as a whole.

E. THE FORGING OF THE “NEW MAN” AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO SOCIAL CHANGE

In addition to being less risky than urban insurrection, Guevara also believed that guerrilla warfare was the mode of struggle that was most likely to bring about the “New Man,” a socialist super hero hardened in the fires of combat and ready to spearhead the completion of the revolution. Once the foundations of capitalism were thrown down a new, socialist, order could emerge. This new world order would need leaders. Guevara believed those leaders would emerge from the guerrilla movement, all of them transformed into a “revolutionary paragon” by their participation in the struggle.¹²⁷ This section highlights how Guevara’s adoption of the concept of a “New Man” created through armed struggle reinforced his belief in the need for the prosecution of an international guerrilla war waged against capitalism.

In 1963, two years before Guevara’s own writings on the subject, he had published Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* in Cuba.¹²⁸ Fanon was a doctor who had participated in the Algerian revolution against the French. He embraced the armed struggle as a “renewal of selfhood,” a path to restoring the dignity stolen by the imperialistic powers.¹²⁹ In addition, Fanon saw the armed struggle as a crucible through which a “New Man” was created.¹³⁰ Guevara likely forged his idea by borrowing from both Fanon’s writings and those of fellow Latin American Aníbal Ponce, who envisioned

¹²⁷ Löwy, *Marxism of Che*, 8, 73; Minogue, “Che Guevara,” 32.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹²⁹ Sebastian Kaempf, “Violence and Victory: Guerrilla Warfare, ‘Authentic Self-affirmation’ and the Overthrow of the Colonial State,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2009): 138.

¹³⁰ Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 40.

a “New or Complete Man” brought about through the “coming to power of the proletariat.”¹³¹

By merging previous writings regarding the “New Man” with his experiences with Castro, Guevara envisioned a “revolutionary paragon,” who was bound to his fellows through a “concrete universal brotherhood.”¹³² Comprised of separate individuals cut from the same cloth, this brotherhood would agree on “what must be done.”¹³³ They would be dedicated communists with highly developed social consciousness and driven by love.¹³⁴ This would all be accomplished as the people in question participated together in the guerrilla struggle.¹³⁵ As the participants struggled and fought alongside each other, their dependence on one another would convince them to throw off their capitalist conditioning and embrace socialism as the one true path to their survival.¹³⁶ For Guevara, this was the only pathway to building a communist world order.¹³⁷ The armed struggle, centered on the guerrilla *foco*, was necessary both to destroy the old capitalist order and to produce the caliber of human being capable of building the communist one meant to replace it.¹³⁸

F. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Guevara’s belief in the guerrilla as a revolutionary vanguard and conflict as the crucible meant to forge new men provided the rationalization for the necessity of an armed struggle to “see man liberated from his alienation.”¹³⁹ In Bolivia and Guatemala, prior to his full adoption of the teachings of “Saint Karl,” Guevara’s observations were providing the practical framework that would become central to his later writings and

131 Löwy, *Marxism of Che*, 8.

132 Löwy, *Marxism of Che*, 19; Minogue, “Che Guevara,” 32.

133 Minogue, “Che Guevara,” 35.

134 Ibid., 32.

135 Bell, *Myth of the Guerrilla*, 41.

136 Ibid.

137 Guevara, “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method,” 151.

138 Löwy, *Marxism of Che*, 67.

139 Che Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 162.

ideas.¹⁴⁰ Adopting the label of a “pragmatic revolutionary,” Guevara attempted to build an experience based, practical model of Marxism for Latin America.¹⁴¹ His role as a revolutionary participant provided additional exemplification of the reasonableness of his theories. Rooted in the Marxian dialectic of the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Guevara mapped his experiences as a witness to the fall of Arbenz and as a guerrilla fighter in Cuba onto the theories of Marx and Lenin.¹⁴² His steadfast belief in the necessity of armed struggle led him to set about trying to join other revolutionary struggles on the American continents almost immediately following the victory over Batista.¹⁴³

Both Guevara and Castro believed in the need for revolution in Latin America. For the better part of a decade, Guevara assisted Castro by training revolutionary movements in an attempt to establish a political ally in the western hemisphere.¹⁴⁴ As seen in the next chapter, those attempts met almost unilaterally with defeat, including those previously mentioned movements in which Guevara was supposed to take part. These defeats were followed by Guevara’s expedition to the Congo, a five-year mission cut short by the failure of the Congolese rebels to gain any traction against their opponents.¹⁴⁵ By the time Guevara emerged from the Congo, Castro’s situation in Cuba was becoming desperate, and Bolivia appeared to represent the last fertile ground available for a guerrilla centric revolutionary movement. His commitment to waging the anti-imperialist struggle would eventually place him in a position where he had to choose between returning to Cuba a defeated man or moving on to another battlefield.

140 Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 171.

141 Löwy, *Marxism of Che*, 3.

142 Ibid.

143 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 16.

144 Ibid., 15.

145 Ibid., 22.

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III. STRATEGY: GEOGRAPHY, POLITICS, AND POPULAR SUPPORT

A. INTRODUCTION

Most arguments that Guevara's decision to start a guerrilla war in Bolivia was misguided stem from assumptions regarding his assessment of Bolivia's revolutionary potential. As mentioned before, Guevara himself did not specifically leave behind a written account of his planning process for the Bolivian *foco*, as far as it is known. This chapter utilizes the first-hand accounts of his friends and contemporaries and the secondhand analysis of his biographers and historians to piece together the factors that made Bolivia an enticing target for a guerrilla movement between 1964 and 1966. The chapter is broken up into two sections. The first describes Bolivia's geographic revolutionary potential, and the second explores its political vulnerability to a guerrilla *foco*.

Before examining the strategic factors that contributed to Guevara's decision, it is necessary to review the goals he hoped to obtain. That the United States was Guevara's targeted enemy has already been stated, as has his belief that an armed struggle against capitalism was an inevitable and necessary process for the building of a true socialist world order.¹⁴⁶ Guevara saw the struggle in Vietnam as the opening phase of an international war against imperialism.¹⁴⁷ He believed that if he could open up a second front, others would be inspired to join him across Asia, Africa, and the Americas.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, he believed if he could accelerate the formation of guerrilla movements across the three continents, then the United States and its imperialist stooges would be forced to exhaust their resources trying to maintain the established order.¹⁴⁹ In order to accomplish this task, Guevara needed a location primed for a prolonged struggle that would allow him easy access to other fronts. He especially desired one with access to his

¹⁴⁶ Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," 176.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Dosal, *Comandante Che*, 215.

home country of Argentina.¹⁵⁰ This chapter augments the ideological factors discussed in the previous chapter by presenting the argument that Bolivia in 1966 contained the best prospects for the achievement of Guevara's ideological aims.

There are four major parts to the strategic side of Guevara's decision. One, considering its central location, Bolivia's geography was a major strategic factor. Second, the political situation in Bolivia, especially the perceived nature of the Barrientos regime, and its apparent similarities to that of Batista's Cuba, also encouraged the idea of Bolivia as ripe for revolution. Third, the reputation of the Bolivian military as ineffective and bumbling provided hope that a guerrilla *foco* would be able to grow unhindered in the Bolivian countryside. Finally, beyond Bolivia's geography, governance, and lack of military prowess, other revolutionary opportunities had also begun to dry up, leaving Bolivia as one of few options that met the necessary objective prerequisites to become home to a guerrilla movement. All four factors contributed to create an environment that Guevara believed was conducive to his success.

B. GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS

There are three geographic factors that caused Bolivia to be appealing to Guevara as a guerrilla haven. First, its central location meant that it could act as a hub for the training of revolutionary cadres from bordering nations.¹⁵¹ Second, Bolivia was far enough away from the United States that it was not likely to respond quickly enough to prevent the growth of the guerrilla front.¹⁵² Third, a large guerrilla front in Bolivia would be capable of fueling other guerrilla movements in the surrounding countries thus providing a great enough threat to the United States, which would eventually be forced to bring its own resources and forces to bear.¹⁵³ The following paragraphs analyze the rationality of these expectations.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 253.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Peru, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Brazil all share a border with Bolivia. The concept of using Bolivia as a staging ground to deploy guerrillas into these countries was not unique to Guevara's final *foco*. Previous movements in both Argentina and Peru had utilized Bolivia as a training ground before proceeding to their final destinations.¹⁵⁴ Consequently, Bolivia possessed a history with the Cuban revolutionaries, and it could be leveraged to get Guevara into the country. The difference between those movements and Guevara's was that, instead of training clandestinely in the jungle and moving on to another target, his would open up an active front against the Bolivian military. As long as the United States stayed out of the conflict initially, Guevara believed he could toy with the Bolivian army, providing real-time on the job training to cadres from the surrounding countries and beyond.¹⁵⁵

Guevara also believed that Bolivia, while important enough to bring the United States into his war, was far enough away that any military response would be delayed until the guerrilla front could be firmly established.¹⁵⁶ According to Guevara's assumed rationale, the location provided the needed distance to ensure his inchoate *foco* could bloom into a full-fledged revolution.¹⁵⁷ As the campaign unfolded, the United States did deploy advisors to Bolivia, similar to Vietnam, but the guerrillas did not survive long enough for history to tell if the United States would have gotten more deeply engaged. However, most analysts would point to the already existent domestic resistance to the Vietnam War as an indicator that the United States would have maintained a minimum-interventionist stance as long as possible.¹⁵⁸ It is possible that the domestic response to the Vietnam War in the United States could have further delayed direct, armed intervention, giving Guevara even more time to build his strength.

Due to the defeat of the *foco* before substantial U.S. intervention, it is impossible to say whether or not Guevara's guerrilla front could have eventually drawn the United

¹⁵⁴ Ulises Estrada, *Tania: Undercover with Che Guevara* (New York: Ocean Press, 2005), 18–19.

¹⁵⁵ Dosal, *Comandante Che*, 255.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 303.

States into a prolonged struggle for the heart of South America.¹⁵⁹ That the United States did not deploy its regular ground forces during any of the massive revolutionary struggles throughout the region after Bolivia suggests that it would not have gotten involved in Bolivia either; however, at the time of the planning and execution of Guevara's movement, it was certainly reasonable to assume that it would.¹⁶⁰ Up until 1966, the history of U.S. interventionism in Latin America had established a clear pattern of behavior.¹⁶¹ Over a hundred years of U.S. intervention left Guevara with the expectation that the response to a guerrilla movement in Bolivia would be similar. Thus, while the outcome of Guevara's decision to fight in Bolivia may seem irrational in hindsight, considering the shift in the U.S. policy regarding foreign intervention that took place immediately following Vietnam, his rationale for expecting U.S. intervention actually had a stronger foundation than some scholars argue.

All three of the preceding geographic factors caused Bolivia to be a tempting place to start a guerrilla *foco*. Thus, Bolivia provided geographic conditions that aligned directly with Guevara's strategic aims. The previous insertion of guerrilla units into Peru and Argentina, coupled with the deployment of U.S. advisors to Bolivia in a similar pattern to that of Vietnam, indicate that Bolivia met at least two of the three requirements that Guevara needed for his *foco*. The early detection and eradication of his *foco* means that the truth of his assumptions about U.S. actions cannot be proven as accurate, but the assumptions were not unreasonable considering the established pattern of U.S. intervention in the decades prior to the Bolivian mission. Overall, Bolivia can be shown to possess geographic factors favorable to the achievement of Guevara's ends. An analysis of the political situation shows it contained revolutionary promise there as well.

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid.

161 Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 10–12.

C. THE BARRIENTOS REGIME

The nature of Bolivia's political regime is considered by some to be the primary reason Guevara agreed to go there.¹⁶² Guevara considered the 1952 revolution incomplete due to its treatment of the indigenous population.¹⁶³ General Barrientos had been a leader during the original revolution in 1952 and had subsequently launched a coup in 1964 against Victor Paz Estenssoro. Many accounts agree that the decision to create a *foco* in Bolivia was made shortly following General Barrientos's coup.¹⁶⁴ In 1966, however, before Guevara arrived in country, Barrientos held elections and won with an exceptional amount of peasant support.¹⁶⁵ Instead of changing his plans in response to the newly elected president, Guevara pushed on with his designs, seemingly in violation of his mandate against starting revolutionary movements against elected governments.¹⁶⁶ This section seeks to justify his incredulous oversight by emphasizing how two components of his ideology influenced his perception of the regime.

First, as mentioned before, Guevara's intended opponent was not necessarily Bolivia, but the United States.¹⁶⁷ President Barrientos, regardless of his popularity with the peasants, still maintained relatively close ties to the United States.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, throughout the 1950s, Bolivia received consistent aid from the United States.¹⁶⁹ These connections, and the political baggage associated with them, were likely enough to convince Guevara that Barrientos was little more than a puppet in the vein of Batista. Regardless of elections, it is more likely than not that Guevara would view any government supported by the United States as unfriendly to his revolutionary aims. U.S. support could also be used as a justification for maintaining a belief that the election results were not legitimate and therefore not representative of what the Bolivian people

¹⁶² Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 19.

¹⁶³ Rojo, *My Friend Ché*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 19.

¹⁶⁵ Wickham-Crowley, *Exploring Revolution*, 47.

¹⁶⁶ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 51.

¹⁶⁷ Guevara, "Message to the Tri-Continental," 174.

¹⁶⁸ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 266–267.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

really wanted.¹⁷⁰ This view, in alignment with Guevara's ideology, allowed him to continue to view his *foco* as the vanguard of the Bolivian people fighting for their right to be free of an oppressive dictator.

The second ideological impact on Guevara's strategic assessment of the Barrientos regime resulted from his belief in the Guerrilla *foco* as revolutionary catalyst.¹⁷¹ From its inception, the Barrientos government pursued policies hostile to the miners' union.¹⁷² This hostility is encapsulated in the account of Rodolfo Saldaña, one of Guevara's Bolivian supporters. His account of the political situation in Bolivia during the 1960s sheds light on why Guevara believed he would receive worker support in Bolivia. Saldaña emphasizes the existence of an upsurge in unrest throughout 1964 caused by inflation, massive layoffs, repression of the unions, and the existence of armed conflict between the army and miners.¹⁷³ As late as October 1964, "massive waves of unrest" were felt in La Paz, leading to the military coup previously mentioned.¹⁷⁴ Following the coup, in 1965, the government reduced the miners' wages and arrested their leaders.¹⁷⁵ By October, massive strikes increased the tension between the miners and the state.¹⁷⁶ After Barrientos's election, conflict between the government and the tin miners continued.¹⁷⁷ Many believe the continued oppression of the miners by the state, conducted with the army, was the final indicator to Guevara that Barrientos, elected or not, represented the type of reactionary regime present in Cuba when he landed there with Fidel in 1956.¹⁷⁸ Accounts of Guevara's initial planning support this interpretation.

Expecting support from the tin miners, Guevara's plan, as it seemed to stand in 1965, was to start a guerrilla movement in the area of Alto Beni, where the miners

170 Guevara, "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," 151–152.

171 Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 51.

172 Saldaña, *Fertile Ground*, 46.

173 Ibid., 43.

174 Ibid., 44.

175 Ibid., 46.

176 Ibid.

177 Ibid., 47.

178 Ibid., 43.

lived.¹⁷⁹ According to multiple sources, Guevara's agents purchased a farm there, but the location was later passed over in favor of one along the Ñancahuazú River.¹⁸⁰ According to Guevara biographer Jon Lee Anderson, the Ñancahuazú farm was suggested by Mario Monje, head of the Bolivian Communist Party. Guevara's agents supported the suggestion because of its more secluded location, sparse population, and proximity to Argentina.¹⁸¹ Despite his original demands, Guevara acquiesced to the recommendation.¹⁸² For some, the decision to shift the focus of operations to the Ñancahuazú farm illustrates Guevara's thoughtlessness.¹⁸³ There are two primary reasons why critics adopt this stance. The first is that Guevara's hand-picked Cuban cadres had been learning Quechua, while the population along the Ñancahuazú spoke Aymara.¹⁸⁴ The language barrier would prove difficult to overcome, and it contributed to Guevara's failure to gather peasant support in the region.¹⁸⁵ The second reason is that the decision took Guevara out of the region where he was likely to find the most support. The 1952 revolution, considered by Guevara to be incomplete, produced agrarian land reform that gave the peasants along the Ñancahuazú rights to their land.¹⁸⁶ Guevara's group of guerrillas appeared to them more like invaders than liberators, a contrast played upon in propaganda spread by the Bolivian army when it finally engaged the *foco*.¹⁸⁷ These two explanations certainly support the argument that Guevara's planning was faulty, but they do not prove that he arrived at his decision in an unreasonable manner.

The most dangerous moment for a guerrilla movement is at its inception, and the population of the Alto Beni region increased those dangers for Guevara and his band.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁹ Anderson, *Che*, 660.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 178.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 174.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 322.

¹⁸⁷ Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 176–177.

¹⁸⁸ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 128; Anderson, *Che*, 660.

It is not unreasonable to conclude that Guevara believed that the Ñancahuazú River would provide better odds for the *foco* to survive its embryonic stage. The language barrier and potential hostility of the peasants were issues that surfaced as the guerrillas were being discovered, but they were not significant enough to be the sole cause of the *foco*'s destruction. The primary reason the *foco* was discovered was not that the guerrillas were operating in a hostile zone without peasant support, but that their neighbor thought they were running a drug operation and he wanted a cut.¹⁸⁹ Without the attention brought on the camp by that neighbor's report of suspected illicit activities it is possible Guevara would have had more time to train his cadres. Even the secondary causes of the guerrilla's exposure did not directly involve the lack of wide popular peasant support or language barriers. Multiple Bolivian cadres either abandoned Guevara shortly after joining the *foco* or were captured and coerced into betraying him.¹⁹⁰ These desertions were not indicative of the peasantry's mindset as a whole as much as they represented the change of heart of individual volunteers as they experienced the hardships of guerrilla struggle. Between deserters and poor clandestine work by his urban network, Guevara never quite had the initiative. Caught before he was ready to fight, it is impossible to know whether or not Guevara was intending to fight along the Ñancahuazú, or if he intended to use the camp as an initial training ground and then move on to a more promising location.

It is disingenuous to argue that Guevara's decision was poorly informed without considering that the decision forced him to weigh the importance of avoiding early detection over the ability of his cadres to communicate with the locals. If he had made the decision to build his *foco* in the Alto Beni, there is no guarantee that it would have been any more successful. Choosing the cover and seclusion of the Ñancahuazú camp over the risk of being detected early in the Alto Beni was not a completely unreasonable decision, and it is not a fair qualifier for labelling Guevara's decision as senseless. If he had been caught in the Alto Beni, people may have similarly assessed his decision as poor. Regardless, the peasants of the Ñancahuazú region were not the only people in Bolivia,

¹⁸⁹ Anderson, *Che*, 671.

¹⁹⁰ Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 357–358.

and Guevara did manage to garner public support from other Bolivians during the time his *foco* was in action.

The story shared by Rodolfo Saldaña regarding the recruitment and repression of the tin miners led by union leader Rosendo Garcia Maisman is evidence that the potential for popular support for the *foco* existed.¹⁹¹ The planned support from Maisman led to what is known as the “Noche De San Juan Massacre.”¹⁹² The night before national union leaders were to meet at the Siglo XX mine, President Barrientos’s troops invaded the mine and murdered them.¹⁹³ Saldaña states, “the guerilla events after March 23rd stirred the people as a whole, the population as a whole, in all their different social layers.”¹⁹⁴ Unfortunately for the guerillas, Bolivian popular support did not sufficiently aid their cause. Saldaña’s account appears to contradict the conventional wisdom that there was no peasant/worker support for the Bolivian movement, but that support was not enough to sustain their efforts. Such evidence demonstrates that Guevara had some reason to expect his revolution to be desired by the Bolivians.

Despite its democratic credentials, the government of President Barrientos was less popular than Guevara’s detractors would have one believe. The treatment of the tin miners grew worse following Barrientos’ election, and there was support for the armed struggle among their ranks.¹⁹⁵ While there was a lack of peasant support for Guevara’s *foco*, the threat of support from the mines was great enough that Barrientos had the army murder the union leaders while they slept.¹⁹⁶ The actions of Barrientos led to more widespread support for the guerrillas, but it was too late for that support to significantly impact the fate of Guevara’s band.¹⁹⁷

191 Saldaña, *Fertile Ground*, 31–32.

192 Ibid., 60–61.

193 Ibid.

194 Ibid., 62.

195 Ibid., 31.

196 Ibid., 60–61.

197 Ibid., 62.

The early detection of the *foco* due to jealous neighbors and deserters was the primary factor that contributed to the *foco*'s failure, not its lack of popular support. Considering follow-on events, it was reasonable to expect some growth of popular support if Guevara could have stayed alive. Arguments that Guevara violated his principles by fomenting an uprising against an elected government are misplaced because they ignore the lack of political leverage experienced by the tin miners, many of whom believed, according to Rodolfo Saldaña, in the necessity for an armed struggle with their government.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, it is possible to decipher the reasoning guiding Guevara's actions. Not only is his rationale explainable, there is clear evidence that the miners were intent on providing the *foco* the type of support necessary to begin building a broader based coalition.¹⁹⁹ Guevara did not simply invent a Bolivian desire for reform and revolution; his experiences and the Bolivian cultural context presented strong evidence that his *foco* could thrive there.

D. A WEAK MILITARY

The poor reputation of the Bolivian army also heightened the appeal of Bolivia as a prime site for a prolonged guerrilla struggle. At the commencement of hostilities, the United States sent Brigadier General William Tope to evaluate the situation.²⁰⁰ General Tope relayed to President Johnson that the Bolivians "lacked everything required for success," and he warned that a more comprehensive intervention may be necessary.²⁰¹ Guevara was thus not the only one who believed that he would be able to give Bolivian forces the run-around, winning easy victories, and rallying the people to his cause. His early victories seemed to bear out those assumptions.²⁰² In fact, the Bolivian army failed to win any significant battles until peasant assistance helped it eliminate half of

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 282.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 281–282.

²⁰² Ibid., 277, 290.

Guevara's force in an ambush on August 31, 1967, almost 10 months after Guevara entered the country.²⁰³

Critics suggest that Guevara was utilizing outdated strategies to combat new developments in counterinsurgency methods.²⁰⁴ This argument is supported by the near catastrophic collapse of guerrilla movements across the continent from 1965–1967, a phenomenon addressed in the next section. It is also borne out in the Bolivian army's ability to garner the support of the peasantry in the surrounding area, either through friendliness or coercion.²⁰⁵ A counterargument to the rise of effective new counterinsurgency doctrine is that the guerrilla groups collapsed from the inside.²⁰⁶ Especially in Venezuela, where the communist party quit guerrilla warfare in favor of a political solution, and in Peru, where three separate guerrilla movements were fighting independently of each other, there is evidence that suggests that the guerrillas were defeated as much by their inability to form a coherent front as they were by improved counterinsurgency strategies.²⁰⁷

To determine whether or not Guevara's assumptions regarding the fitness of the Bolivian army to fight a guerrilla war were reasonable requires us to know the difference between what he knew and what he should have known. Guevara knew as early as 1965 that the nature of guerrilla warfare was changing as he noted that the "North Americans" were adapting to guerrilla tactics.²⁰⁸ While he may have underestimated the impact U.S. training would have on the effectiveness of Bolivian forces, it seems reasonable to assume that since he recognized the changing nature of the conflict, he considered those factors in his planning. Considering the early detection of the *foco*, it is difficult to say whether or not the Bolivian forces would have been as effective at tightening the noose around Guevara. Despite their advantage, it still took them a number of months to locate

203 Ibid., 291.

204 Ibid., 272–273.

205 Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 177.

206 Brand, *Latin America's Cold War*, 68.

207 Anderson, *Che*, 645.

208 Che Guevara, "Interview with Josie Fanon," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 403.

and destroy the column of invalids that Guevara had left behind shortly after the conflict started.²⁰⁹ Moreover, it took them longer still to locate and destroy the rest of Guevara's *foco*, and that was as much a result of his refusal to leave the combat zone without the lost half of his *foco* as it was the expertise of the Bolivian military.²¹⁰ Guevara's assumption that the Bolivian military would be easy to evade may not have been proved accurate, but that does not mean it was imprudent or unrealistic given the reputation of Bolivian forces before the conflict.

E. THE LOSS OF OTHER REVOLUTIONARY OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to its prime location, questionably legitimate regime, and supposedly poorly trained army, Bolivia's strategic appeal was also heightened by the decrease of revolutionary opportunity elsewhere in the world. Despite rumors that he had a falling out with Fidel, Guevara's primary reason for leaving Cuba to fight in Africa had been its revolutionary potential.²¹¹ In an interview with Josie Fanon, widow of the previously mentioned Franz Fanon, Guevara expressed that the African movements were part of the "inevitable and natural reply of international revolutionary struggle."²¹² Unfortunately, Guevara's exit from the Congo theatre in 1965 took place significantly sooner than he had believed it would.²¹³ The coincidental overthrow of Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, Guevara and Fidel's closest ally in Africa, meant Africa's revolutionary potential had dissipated.²¹⁴ Ben Bella's fall pointedly weakened Guevara's African network, prompting him to look to continue the international armed struggle elsewhere.²¹⁵

By the time Guevara is believed to have made his final decision to utilize Bolivia in 1965, another series of unfortunate events had taken place beyond the failure of the Congo mission and the fall of President Ben Bella. Guerrilla movements in Guatemala,

²⁰⁹ Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 302.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 302–303.

²¹¹ Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 16–17.

²¹² Guevara, "Interview with Josie Fanon," 403.

²¹³ Anderson, *Che*, 643.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 617.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela were crushed or crumbling.²¹⁶ In Argentina, a failed *foco* in 1964 and a regime change rendered conditions unfit to attempt a second *foco*.²¹⁷ The strongest clandestine network left to Guevara was one he had built in Bolivia with the help of Manual Piñeiro, the head of the Cuban General Directorate of Intelligence.²¹⁸

As mentioned before, the Cuban government had used its Bolivian network to insert guerrilla *foci* into Peru and Argentina prior to Guevara's departure from Cuba.²¹⁹ That network had since grown and included a number of Bolivian insiders.²²⁰ Because he already had resources committed to the region, it made sense that Guevara would utilize them for his final mission.²²¹ Using the Bolivian network did not in and of itself mean that Guevara would have to fight there. Rather, he could have chosen, and by all accounts eventually intended, to try again in Peru or Argentina, but it undoubtedly made the decision to start in Bolivia easier.

F. CHAPTER SUMMARY

Bordering Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Chile, and Guevara's homeland, Argentina, Bolivia's central location made it the perfect geographic location for a centrally based guerrilla front meant to serve as a training ground for other transnational *foco*. Additionally, the unrest of the Bolivian tin miners, in spite of a democratically elected government, suggested to Guevara that there was enough of a schism between workers and government to provide the objective conditions for a successful guerrilla *foco*, namely, the "wave of hate that repression creates."²²² With revolutionary potential deteriorating in Africa and throughout most of the rest of the Americas, Bolivia was, despite its imperfections, the most suitable target. Considering Guevara left Africa with

²¹⁶ Ibid., 645.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 651.

²¹⁹ Estrada, *Tania*, 18–19.

²²⁰ Anderson, *Che*, 646.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Guevara, "Cuba: Exceptional Case," 63.

the intention of never returning to Cuba and continuing the armed struggle wherever he could, Bolivia made the most sense as the target for a guerrilla *foco*.

Arguments that Guevara misread the political situation in Bolivia downplay the unrest among the miners, which was strong enough to warrant the assassination of their leaders by the army in a nighttime raid on the Siglo XX mines on June 23, 1967, three months after Guevara's guerrillas were forced into action by the Bolivian military.²²³ The rapid response of the Bolivian military was a result of betrayals beyond the scope of Guevara's planning process. Based on previous performance of the Bolivian army, there was no reason for Guevara to think he could not best them long enough for the support of the miners to make a difference.²²⁴ He may be guilty of underestimating the Bolivian response, but there was no tacit evidence illustrating the competence of the Bolivian army before they dispatched Guevara's *foco*.²²⁵ The failure of the Bolivian *foco* to survive was not as much a result of poor homework by Guevara as it was a result of the unexpected competence of the Bolivian army.²²⁶ Therefore, it is not accurate to depict his decision to fight in Bolivia as irresponsible or uninformed.

223 Saldaña, *Fertile Ground*, 62.

224 Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 282.

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid., 299.

IV. PSYCHOLOGY: FAILURE, LOYALTY, AND IDENTITY

A. INTRODUCTION

In addition to the ideological drivers and strategic factors analyzed in the previous chapters, Guevara experienced a number of psychological pressures that drove him into the jungles of Bolivia. This chapter outlines the impact of three separate factors that created psychological pressure on Guevara to take action along his ideological and strategic lines of thought.

The first, the pressure of failure, was a result of Guevara's failed attempts to rejoin the international guerrilla struggle on the ground. After multiple failed attempts at joining mature movements in Latin America, Guevara found a movement in Africa that desired support from the Cuban government. His failure to positively impact the Congolese insurgency led him to cease looking for mature guerrilla movements to join and focus on being the center of a movement from its inception.

The second pressure, loyalty, is found in Guevara's relationship with Fidel Castro. It was Guevara's admiration of Castro that led him to cease his role as a wandering bohemian and take up arms to fight against imperialism. Throughout the period of 1959–1967, Guevara repeatedly illustrated his support for Castro in both word and deed. While there is some debate on whether Castro or Guevara chose Bolivia, Guevara's devotion to Castro leaves little room to doubt his willingness to support Castro regardless of who made the final decision.

Furthermore, the pressure created by Guevara's identity as a revolutionary also played a role in his decision to fight in Bolivia. The third section outlines how Guevara's early experiences in Guatemala and Mexico led him to leave his life as a wandering bohemian and assume the identity of a socialist revolutionary. Guevara believed that he could maintain that identity only through continuous revolutionary action. This pressure, combined with the strategic appeal of Bolivia and his continued belief in the need for armed struggle to ensure revolution, contributed the final necessary ingredient to his decision for Bolivia.

B. PRESSURE OF FAILURE

This section highlights the pressure placed upon Guevara by his experiences trying to spread revolution outward from Cuba between 1959 and 1965. These experiences fueled the impatience that drove Guevara to enter Bolivia at the inception of the *foco* instead of waiting for it to mature. On three different occasions Guevara decided to join Cuban-backed guerrillas, and each time the underdeveloped *foco* was eliminated before Guevara could join them.²²⁷ Finally, Guevara decided to find an already existing, mature movement to join. Finding such a movement in the Congo, Guevara left Cuba at the head of one hundred Cubans to assist the Congolese in their insurgency.²²⁸ The failure of the Congolese insurgency further convinced Guevara that it was not just his presence and influence that was needed, it was also his direct leadership. His recounting of the Congo operation is highly critical of the lackadaisical attitude of the Congolese leaders.²²⁹ Pressured by the conviction that his increased personal involvement was necessary for success, Guevara sought to join the Bolivian *foco* as soon as possible to provide the leadership that he believed necessary for it to succeed. Without experiencing the loss of his comrades and the poor leadership of the Congolese struggle, Guevara may have been patient with the Bolivian *foco*, waiting to assume command until it was appropriately mature.

Guevara felt keenly the disappointment and despair of several failed *foco*, he needed to plunge not just his mind, but also his body, into a guerrilla movement. According to Jon Lee Anderson, Guevara once remarked to a friend attempting to cheer his downcast mood, “Here you see me, behind a desk...while my people die during missions I’ve sent them on.”²³⁰ This comment, made shortly after Guevara learned that the guerrilla *foco* led by Jorge Masetti had disappeared in the Salta province of northern Argentina, represents the moment Guevara decided to become personally re-involved in

²²⁷ Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 16.

²²⁸ Anderson, *Che*, 597.

²²⁹ Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 220.

²³⁰ Anderson, *Che*, 561.

the armed struggle against imperialism.²³¹ As mentioned before, it was the third time that a guerrilla movement had met its end before Guevara could execute his plan to join it.²³² In 1959, almost immediately after the Fidelistas defeated Batista, Guevara was planning on joining a guerrilla movement in Nicaragua.²³³ In 1960, following the collapse of the Nicaraguan option, he made plans to join a movement in Colombia, which was also defeated before Guevara deemed conditions adequate for his arrival.²³⁴ The Argentine disaster convinced Guevara that, for his ideas to succeed, he would need to implement them personally.²³⁵ Left without many options on the American continents, he began to look elsewhere.

Ultimately, his belief in the necessity of his personal leadership in the field continued to ferment in his psyche. Touring Africa to assess its revolutionary potential and offer Cuban aid for its post-colonial struggles, Guevara agreed to send the Congolese revolutionaries 30 Cuban advisors.²³⁶ Upon his return, Castro, sensing his excitement and possibly attempting to be rid of him, suggested that Guevara could go as well.²³⁷ In the end, Guevara led a column of one hundred Cubans on a mission to support the Congolese insurgency.²³⁸ In the epilogue to his personal account, Guevara describes the qualities and deficiencies of most of the Congolese leaders he encounters.²³⁹ Overall, Guevara sees the leadership among the Congolese rebels as weak and working against its avowed purpose.²⁴⁰ He is especially critical of their insistence to maintain their distance from the front, enjoying the vices of the cities while their soldiers suffer on the front.²⁴¹ It was a

231 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 19.

232 Ibid., 16.

233 Ibid.

234 Anderson, *Che*, 575.

235 Ibid.

236 Ibid.

237 Ibid., 588.

238 Ibid., 597.

239 Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 220.

240 Ibid.

241 Ibid.

lesson in leadership that likely reinforced Guevara's conviction that his next attempt in the Americas would require his direct supervision.

Guevara's early attempts to join revolutionary movements on the South American continent were frustrated by the early elimination of his friends and allies before he could join them.²⁴² Frustration at watching his friends die while he sat behind a desk, combined with the revolutionary potential on the African continent, drove Guevara to join the struggle in the Congo.²⁴³ After observing the lack of quality leadership among the African insurgents, Guevara concluded that his personal leadership was necessary, causing him to travel to Bolivia to participate in the building of the *foco* from the ground up, exposing himself to the expanded risk of a guerrilla movement in its early stages.²⁴⁴ Without the pressure of his failed attempts at fomenting revolution from a distance, it is possible that Guevara would have maintained his practice of supporting movements until they became advanced enough to guarantee him a particular level of safety. As it was, Guevara could no longer sit by and watch leaders less qualified than himself lead the people he knew into danger.

C. PRESSURE OF LOYALTY

It is nearly impossible, and at the least imprudent, to discuss Guevara's decision to lead a Bolivian *foco* without addressing the impact of his relationship with Castro on that decision. This section presents the argument that Guevara's loyalty to Castro, combined with their shared vision regarding continental revolution, pressured him into leading the Bolivian mission. It addresses accusations that Castro used the mission as a way to distance himself from Guevara while he tried to draw Cuba into a closer orbit with the USSR.²⁴⁵ Originally a supporter of close ties with the Soviets, Castro's enthusiasm had been tempered by Russia's continued unwillingness to directly confront the United

²⁴² Anderson, *Che*, 561.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Resnick, *Black Beret*, 229.

²⁴⁵ Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 209.

States.²⁴⁶ The Soviets' failure to consult with Cuban authorities before withdrawing their missiles during the Cuban missile crisis, along with their withdrawal of economic support to Cuba over his policy of exporting revolution to the rest of Latin America, strained Cuba's relationship with Russia.²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Guevara's increasing impatience with the lack of Soviet support for the exportation of revolution had begun to place stress on Cuba's relationship with the USSR as well. It also aided the development of rumors that he was courting the Chinese government for support in his, and Castro's, revolutionary endeavors.²⁴⁸ Assuming that Castro viewed the survival of his regime as dependent on the Soviets, historians have argued that Castro must have been trying to separate his fate from that of Guevara.²⁴⁹ Despite these accusations, evidence is presented in the literature that suggests that the achievement of Castro's true foreign policy aims was highly dependent on the success of Guevara and the Bolivian *foco*.

Guevara's high opinion of Castro was apparent as early as his decision to join the exiled Cuban on his revolutionary journey. In a letter written to Fidel in 1958, Guevara extolls him for advancing the possibility for revolution "for all of the Americas."²⁵⁰ Later, in an interview with Jorge Masetti, Guevara argues that his reason for joining the *Granma* expedition is that Castro is an "extraordinary man" and an "avenue for the resistance" to imperialism.²⁵¹ Guevara's interactions with Castro had produced in him a conviction of revolutionary purpose and pulled him into a cause that would create the first environment in which Guevara felt that he truly belonged.²⁵²

Following the success of Castro's revolution, Guevara did whatever was asked of him. Castro laid claim to significant influence upon Guevara. In turn, the latter supported Castro by assuming the positions of Minister of Industry and Head of the Cuban National

²⁴⁶ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, 52.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 50–52.

²⁴⁸ Anderson, *Che*, 580.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 603.

²⁵⁰ Guevara, "Letter to Fidel Castro," in Bonachea and Valdéz, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, 418.

²⁵¹ Guevara, "Interview with Jorge Masetti," 363–364.

²⁵² Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 167–168.

Bank, despite a lack of practical experience in both areas.²⁵³ He also filled the role of foreign ambassador, repeatedly reminding the world that the “only leader of the revolution is Fidel Castro.”²⁵⁴ It was a refrain that Guevara would repeat across multiple interviews and writings.²⁵⁵ The reason for this repetition is commonly believed to have been either that Guevara was responding to outsiders who were trying to drive a wedge between him and Castro or that Guevara was trying to mask a wedge that had already been driven between the two.

Before leaving Cuba to fight alongside the Congolese rebels, Guevara penned his aforementioned “farewell” letter to Castro. It is this letter that is presented as the most concrete evidence that Guevara had broken with Castro and left Cuba to pursue revolution on his own terms. Guevara also expressed that he would be “loyal to you [Castro] to the last consequence of my acts.”²⁵⁶ The letter may have been intended for use as evidence that Castro was not directly dictating Guevara’s actions, but his pledge suggests that his actions after leaving Cuba were still influenced by his loyalty to Castro. The impact of Guevara’s relationship with Castro after the former left for Africa is illustrated in the following three examples. First, as the Congolese insurgency was collapsing, Guevara refused to withdraw Cuban forces without written orders from Congolese leaders so as to prevent rumors that his Cuban cadres had abandoned the cause.²⁵⁷ Second, he allegedly returned from Africa to participate in the Bolivian mission at Castro’s request.²⁵⁸ Third, once in Bolivia, Guevara maintained direct communication with Castro as long as possible, losing it only once he was surrounded by Bolivian forces and cut off from his urban network.²⁵⁹ In all three instances, Guevara either deferred, responded, or reported to Castro in a manner that suggests that his claims that Fidel was “at the head of the column” were honest declarations meant to send a message to Castro’s

²⁵³ Anderson, *Che*, 417, 430.

²⁵⁴ Guevara, “Interview with Telemundo Television,” 379.

²⁵⁵ Guevara, *Che: Selected Works*, 108, 168, 379, 386.

²⁵⁶ Guevara, “Farewell Letter to Fidel Castro,” 423.

²⁵⁷ Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 204.

²⁵⁸ Castañeda, *Compañero*, 327–328.

²⁵⁹ Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 131, 145.

opponents and detractors.²⁶⁰ They also highlight the depths of Guevara's loyalty. The impact of that loyalty on the Bolivian mission is explored next.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, some authors believe that Guevara's participation in the Bolivian *foco* allegedly took place following cajoling by Castro.²⁶¹ Who chose Bolivia as the target for Guevara's final mission is a question that has gone unsatisfactorily answered since the movement's failure entered the annals of history.²⁶² Fidel and Piñero, the aforementioned head of Cuban intelligence, insisted that Guevara chose Bolivia and executed all of the planning.²⁶³ Two of Guevara's biographers, Jon Lee Anderson and Jorge Castañeda, believe that there is enough evidence to suggest that Castro both chose Bolivia and applied pressure on Guevara to lead the Bolivian *foco*.²⁶⁴ Considering how the previously mentioned strategic situation in the Americas left Bolivia as the best, though certainly not ideal, option for the insertion of a Cuban-backed guerrilla *foco*, it seems reasonable to conclude that Guevara and Castro may have agreed on the target country, rendering the need to establish who reached the conclusion first moot.

D. PRESSURE OF IDENTITY

The last of the three psychological pressures contributing to Guevara's decision to go to Bolivia was his identity as a revolutionary. For Guevara, being a revolutionary meant fighting for freedom whether or not the "present moment was right."²⁶⁵ This section outlines how Guevara's participation in the Cuban Revolution provided him with a sense of belonging and purpose that he had not had previously—a purpose that almost demanded he trudge the jungle in pursuit of the transcendence he believed awaited him and his companions.²⁶⁶ Utilizing his personal journals and letters, it is possible to point to

260 Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," 168.

261 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 327–328.

262 Anderson, *Che*, 647.

263 Piñero, *Che Guevara*, 88.

264 Anderson, *Che*, 648; Castañeda, *Compañero*, 327–328.

265 Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," 179.

266 Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba," 155, 160–162, 169.

the very moment when Guevara changed from wandering bohemian into die hard revolutionary—and when his academic belief in the armed struggle became a burning need to act. Starting with the listlessness found in his traveling journals prior to the Cuban Revolution, this section traces the development of Guevara’s identity as a revolutionary, emphasizing the pressure placed on Guevara to get personally involved in revolutionary efforts on the South American continent.

In August 1953, in a letter to his mother, Guevara states, “of my future life I can tell you nothing, because I know nothing.”²⁶⁷ It was just one of many instances where he specified to his audience that his “plans for the future” were still unclear.²⁶⁸ Even after he joined with Castro’s Cubans, he still indicated that he is “waiting to see what happens.”²⁶⁹ Overcoming his uncertainty, his willingness to identify with Castro’s band shows a break in his behavior, spurred on by the budding respect and comradery he developed with Castro while under his tutelage.²⁷⁰

Ardently unaligned, Guevara had spent most of his time prior to 1955 avoiding associations with political groups. The most poignant event is related by Guevara’s friend and traveling companion Ricardo Rojo, regarding Guevara’s attempt to volunteer with the Guatemalan Public Health Department for medical work among the indigenous population. Rojo quotes Guevara as responding to a query regarding his non-possession of a Guatemalan Party of Labor (PGT) membership card that he was “a revolutionary, and I don’t believe affiliations of this kind mean anything.”²⁷¹ When told that it was a standard practice, Guevara continued, insisting that “the day I decide to affiliate myself I will do it from conviction, not obligation.”²⁷² A second indication of Guevara’s hesitancy to align himself too closely with a cause can be found in a letter to his mother in November of 1954. In it, Guevara discusses the friendship he had observed among

267 Guevara, *Latin America Diaries*, 31.

268 Ibid., 31.

269 Ibid., 173.

270 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 88–89.

271 Rojo, *My Friend Ché*, 56.

272 Ibid.

members of the Guatemalan Communist Party, concluding that “sooner or later I will join.”²⁷³ He then continues on to explain that he does not know when that would be due to his inability to travel to Europe if he “submitted to a rigid discipline.”²⁷⁴

Guevara did not immediately feel the overwhelming need to align fully with any political positions; however, the pressure of his experiences would lead to the assumption of his revolutionary identity and the need to act accordingly. On July 15, 1956, Guevara revealed his new identity in the response to a letter his mother had sent. His mother wrote to him while he sat in a prison in Mexico City with Fidel and his compatriots; concerned about his activities in Mexico, she had offered advice focused on maintaining moderation.²⁷⁵ Guevara’s response conveys a sharp contrast to his previous letters. No longer content as a drifting adventurer, Guevara writes with new purpose. He dismisses his mother’s pleas for moderation, referring to it as one of “the most execrable qualities an individual could have.”²⁷⁶ Eschewing her advice, he emphasizes, without detail, the transformative process of his time in prison and his training with the Cubans.²⁷⁷ He also shares that he has attempted to get rid of his previous self, “the bohemian, unconcerned about his neighbor, filled with a sense of self-sufficiency.”²⁷⁸ In its place, he claimed to have found beauty in “this sense of we.”²⁷⁹ Guevara had found a place to belong.

The final paragraph in the letter to his mother provides two clues into what his future would hold. First, Guevara describes the “pressure,” created by his desire to act with conviction in an environment wherein the political powers of Mexico were insisting that he “abjure his ideals.”²⁸⁰ He muses that his mother would rather have a son who “died wherever doing his duty” over a son who lived as a “Barabbas,” walking free while

²⁷³ Ibid., 145.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Guevara, *Latin American Diaries*, 167–168.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

others died for their convictions.²⁸¹ Second, he predicts that he will “be off to somewhere else” after participating in Fidel’s Cuban expedition.²⁸² These passages, when combined with Guevara’s description of finding belonging in the previous paragraph, support the argument that Guevara’s decision to go to Bolivia was influenced by the psychological pressure created by his personal convictions and identity as a revolutionary. The revolutionary felt an unavoidable call towards action.²⁸³ Furthermore, he believed in the need for the armed struggle, but more significantly, he felt the need to engage in one directly and soon.

E. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The psychological pressures Guevara experienced as a result of the loss of his friends, his loyalty to Fidel, and his identity as a guerrilla were significant factors in his decision to fight in Bolivia. All three contributed to his decision to continue fighting after the action in the Congo. The loss of his friends in other, failed guerrilla movements drove him to enter Bolivia at the inception of the *foco*.

Not wanting to lose more friends and believing that those friends might have lived if they had had the right leadership, Guevara refused to wait for the *foco* to mature before he became a participant, breaking with the patience exhibited in his previous behavior.²⁸⁴ Castro’s appeals to Guevara provided additional impetus for his attempt to foment revolution in Bolivia.²⁸⁵ Surrounded by enemies and losing ground to Soviet and Chinese demands, Castro needed a distraction, and Guevara’s Bolivian efforts matched with his needs nicely.²⁸⁶

281 Ibid.

282 Ibid.

283 Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” 169.

284 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 19.

285 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 327–328.

286 Anderson, *Che*, 531, 644; Castañeda, *Compañero*, 338.

V. CONCLUSION

Guevara's participation in the initial stages of the Bolivian *foco* was driven by the psychological pressures placed upon him by being forced to watch his friends die while he supported the Cuban Revolution from a desk in Havana. Bolivia, while not a completely ideal location for revolutionary activity, exhibited enough potential to justify the insertion of a guerrilla *foco*. Claims that Guevara's scheme was "thoughtless" or "adventurist" are misplaced and do not accurately represent the objective revolutionary conditions as they existed while Guevara was in the decision-making process. Guevara's evaluation of Bolivia's revolutionary potential was grounded in specific ideological and strategic factors that led him to value different aspects of the situation than his critics emphasize. Pressured by the desperation of Fidel to open a guerrilla front to relieve pressure on his regime in Cuba, Guevara made the best choice available considering his unwillingness to return to Cuba or wait for better conditions to present themselves somewhere else.

Guevara was a true believer in the need for an international proletarian revolution. He viewed the United States as the target of that revolution and its participation in Vietnam as the opening stage.²⁸⁷ Believing that the best teacher was the "University of Experience," Guevara sought to test Marx's theories and held the Cuban Revolution up as the exemplification of Marx's correctness.²⁸⁸ Well-traveled, Guevara believed that the objective conditions for revolution existed throughout Latin America; they just needed a spark.²⁸⁹ Guevara's attempt to light that spark in Bolivia was ideologically based on the belief that a true socialist revolution could not take place unless all remnants of capitalism were thrown down and destroyed. This was especially true of the armed forces of the vanguard of imperialism, the United States. To accomplish this task, armed force was necessary. It was also necessary to pick a country where the United States had high enough interest to involve its own armed forces in its defense. Bolivia had been

²⁸⁷ Guevara, "Message to the Tricontinental," 176.

²⁸⁸ Guevara, "Interview with Laura Bergquist #2," 398.

²⁸⁹ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 50.

supported by the United States since the 1950s, and it had some of the closest voluntary ties to the United States of any country in Latin America.²⁹⁰

Strategically, Guevara needed a country that would allow him access to as many other countries as possible. He envisioned a prolonged guerrilla war wherein revolutionaries from all over Latin America would come to receive training before exporting the revolution to their own countries. Bolivia's geographic position, bordering five other countries, including Guevara's own Argentina, was perfect for that aim. The reputation of its military and existing unrest among the tin miners likely contributed to Guevara's belief that a prolonged war in Bolivia was possible.²⁹¹ This belief was strong enough for Guevara to act despite two red flags present in the Bolivian situation.

The first of those flags is summed up by Richard L. Harris's accusation that "Che failed to understand...that the revolution of 1952 gave the Bolivian masses...a real stake in the social order as well as a sense of involvement in the political system and cultural community of their country."²⁹² These accusations are countered by Jorge Castañeda's contention that Guevara, in an interaction with Monje in 1964, suggested that land reform was the very reason Guevara did not think "the Indians would join a guerrilla struggle."²⁹³ Guevara's opinion about the indigenous Bolivian's attachment to the "cultural community of their country" has been illustrated previously in his remarks to Ricardo Rojo.²⁹⁴ While Guevara may have underestimated the level of support the peasants had for President Barrientos, Guevara was aware both of the land reform implemented by the Bolivian Revolutionary Government of 1952 and potentially skeptical of the likelihood of Bolivian peasants supporting another revolution.²⁹⁵ These factors suggest that while he did expect the peasants to join him eventually, he knew their loyalty was neither guaranteed nor likely to develop rapidly. That sentiment is reflected

290 Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 266–267.

291 Dosal, *Commandante Che*, 282.

292 Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 171.

293 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 334.

294 Rojo, *My Friend Ché*, 28.

295 Castañeda, *Compañero*, 334.

in his journal entry summarizing the month of May when he states that gaining the peasant's support "is a slow and patient task."²⁹⁶ Expectedly, he becomes more frustrated as peasant support continues to be elusive in the following months, but that could reflect frustration at his increasingly desperate military situation just as much as it could reflect the failure of the peasants to meet his expectations.²⁹⁷ While Guevara's personal expectations are a matter of conjuncture based on secondhand accounts, his focus on gathering support from the tin miners suggests that he was well aware of the uphill battle he would be fighting to gain peasant support.

Likely, knowing he had to rely on the miners, Guevara was forced to decide on setting up his initial camp among them in the Alto Beni, increasing the likelihood of the *foco* being detected, or in the jungle, further away from his support base but better obscured with a lower chance of detection. He also had to consider a site that would facilitate the expansion of his guerrilla front into the surrounding countries, especially Argentina.²⁹⁸ His decision to use the camp along the Ñancahuazú River was not necessarily an attempt to be among the peasants, who he knew would not join him right away, as much as it was likely meant to provide a secluded base for the *foco* until he was ready to initiate operations against the Bolivian military.²⁹⁹

The lack of support provided by the Bolivia Communist Party (BCP) was a second red flag that forced Guevara to make a difficult decision. While many of Guevara's supporters emphasize that the BCP had promised to aid him and then abandoned him, it seems just as likely that Guevara desired to operate free of the political pressures the party might try to place upon him.³⁰⁰ While he does not claim to have purposely driven Monje away by refusing his demands, Guevara does mention the lack of political restraints as a positive result of the interaction.³⁰¹ Guevara's apparently cavalier

²⁹⁶ Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 163.

²⁹⁷ Harris, *Death of a Revolutionary*, 175–176.

²⁹⁸ Ciro Bustos, *Che Wants to See You: The Untold Story of Che Guevara* (London: Versa, 2013), 176.

²⁹⁹ Anderson, *Che*, 660.

³⁰⁰ Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 60.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

attitude toward the BCP can be attributed to his belief that the guerrilla *foco*, not the BCP represented the vanguard of the people.³⁰² By taking the field in the name of the people, Guevara earned the right to lead them, and he certainly was not going to share that right with those who were not dedicated to the armed struggle.³⁰³ This point of view is supported by the way Guevara had always produced an environment friendly to outcasts and misfits.³⁰⁴ As Minister of Industry, he had a reputation for taking in those Cubans in disfavor with the party.³⁰⁵ His Bolivian *foco* was no different; it existed for those who were alienated and anyone willing to fight against imperialism.³⁰⁶ Despite losing the BCP's support, a fact of which Guevara illustrates his awareness in his journal, he pressed on with his plan, counting on the tin miners to supply the forces he would need to fill his ranks.

Citing the lack of peasant support, or the loss of support from the BCP as evidence of Guevara's "adventurist" attitude, does not accurately portray Guevara's understanding or handling of those situations. Guevara knew that his primary allies in Bolivia would not be the peasants, and though he expected some assistance from them, he was aware that it would be difficult for his guerrillas to establish legitimacy in their eyes. Guevara's refusal to hand the reins of his *foco* to Monje, and therefore losing the support of the BCP, highlights Guevara's refusal to compromise his belief that change had to be thought of "fundamentally in terms of the armed struggle."³⁰⁷ It also followed his conviction that poor leadership is what had failed the armed struggle previously.³⁰⁸ Monje had already admitted to Fidel that he would support a political solution, a non-starter for Guevara, whose previous experiences in Bolivia and Guatemala had convinced him it was "either a socialist revolution or a make believe one."³⁰⁹

302 Guevara, "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," 151.

303 Ibid.

304 Anderson, *Che*, 573.

305 Ibid.

306 Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, 61.

307 Guevara, "Tactics and Strategies," 80.

308 Guevara, *Congo Diary*, 219–221; Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 64.

309 Guevara, "Guerrilla Warfare: A Method," 151.

The most common psychological explanations for Guevara's decision revolve around two main points, the pressure he felt because of the failure of guerrilla warfare to gain traction in Latin America and the tension between himself and Fidel as the Cuban Revolution progressed. While it is true that the armed struggle was failing to produce another Cuba, Guevara seemed more concerned with the loss of his friends than he was with temporary setbacks in what he considered the era of "transition from capitalism to socialism."³¹⁰ Piñeiro insists that the loss of Masetti and the Argentine *foco* is what finally compelled Guevara to leave Cuba for the battlefield.³¹¹ Others contend that Guevara had served his usefulness as a representative of the Cuban Revolution and that Fidel needed him to move on.³¹² These assumptions have led to accusations that Fidel encouraged Guevara to go, first to Africa, and then to Bolivia, so as to be rid of him.³¹³

Guevara's professed loyalty to Fidel suggests that Guevara would have gone wherever Fidel asked him to go.³¹⁴ By the same token, Guevara and Fidel had been working in tandem throughout the early half of the 1960s, taking turns publicly calling out the United States, Russia, China, or anyone else they perceived as acting improperly toward Cuba.³¹⁵ It has been even been said that they "always complemented each other."³¹⁶ While Guevara's embarrassment at Fidel's public reading of the farewell letter he gave him before leaving for the Congo is believed to have caused him to refuse to return to Cuba, it did not prevent him from communicating with Fidel or change the fact that he "had an anti-imperialist and tri-continental strategic conception that fully coincided with the Cuban Revolution."³¹⁷ In other words, his goals and Fidel's were the same. If Fidel did have to convince Guevara to go to Bolivia, he was likely just reminding him of their shared vision. After all, Guevara was a revolutionary, and his duty

310 Guevara, "Tactics and Strategies," 83.

311 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 64.

312 Anderson, *Che*, 603.

313 Ibid.

314 Guevara, "Farewell Letter to Fidel Castro," 423.

315 Anderson, *Che*, 593.

316 Piñeiro, *Che Guevara*, 39.

317 Ibid., 85.

was “to make the revolution.”³¹⁸ From this perspective, Guevara’s decision to fight in Bolivia was not “infantile romanticism.” In contrast, it was a calculated risk by a “pragmatic revolutionary.” While it turned out to be ill-fated, Guevara undertook his attempt to spread the Cuban Revolution to the South American continent because he assessed that the potential for victory outweighed the risks of defeat. It was an act of pragmatic idealism that should remind us that a decision is not unwise simply because it ends in defeat.

318 Fidel Castro, “Second Declaration of Havana,” speech, Havana, Cuba, February 4, 1962, <http://www.walterlippmann.com/fc-02-04-1962.pdf>.

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